

In Africa, It Takes a Certain Type of Village

First Lady's Focus on Trip Is Upbeat, Ignoring Misery

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ASMARA, Eritrea, March 29—For the title of her best-selling book "It Takes a Village," Hillary Rodham Clinton chose an African proverb to drive home her message that raising children is the responsibility of society as a whole. In the last two weeks, Clinton for the first time visited some of the villages that inspired that saying.

What the first lady found during a goodwill tour of Africa that ended tonight were uplifting examples of communities where elders and their tribes are struggling to learn about democracy and human rights, homeless women have banded together to build their own houses from the ground up, and villagers have started collective businesses, banks and health clinics.

What she did not see were villages where hunger and disease have given way to despair. And what she overlooked in those places she did visit were practices that certainly would be repugnant to her, such as men taking multiple wives and young girls being circumcised in a practice called genital mutilation by its critics.

The first lady's goodwill tour could more properly be called a good-news tour. In villages such as Saam Njaay in Senegal, Olturoto in Tanzania and Embaderho here in Eritrea, her relentless focus on success stories gave the impression that all of Africa is moving impressively to the future.

That was no accident. Clinton knows all the horror stories of sub-Saharan Africa. She just decided the rest of the tale is too often obscured and deserving of global attention.

"I... knew that Africa had a positive story to tell—one that Americans could learn from," she said in a speech to Ugandan lead-

ers Friday night in which she wrapped up the lessons of her trip. "All across Africa, individuals like yourselves and communities are coming together, forging bold and creative solutions at the grass-roots level and at the highest reaches of government."

Outside the conference hall where she spoke in the capital of Kampala, though, there were sober reminders



BY DOUG MILLS—ASSOCIATED PRESS

Hillary Rodham Clinton, wearing traditional scarf, ends Africa tour in Asmara, Eritrea, where she met workers at a training center for female veterans.

that the picture is not altogether so rosy.

"She should be taken around to see for herself how deprived the majority of Ugandans are," one such Ugandan, Willy Kituuku, wrote in a letter to a Kampala newspaper. "If she can be let to witness traffic jams when it has rained, if she could see children studying under trees, if she can visit hospitals and see for herself that drugs are not there, chances are that she will go back home with the right picture of the country badly affected by poverty, unemployment and disease to mention a few."

Still, Clinton is hardly the type for gilded tours of palaces and historic landmarks. As in many of her previous journeys abroad, she eschewed formal state dinners and generally made only token appearances with dignitaries in the six African nations she visited.

She went out of her way to venture into the countryside, leading caravans of aides and reporters up rocky, unpaved roads and through dusty fields to inspect huts made of

mud and cow dung, for example. In a small village of the Masai tribe on the Serengeti Plain, she saw numerous young children whose faces were so covered with flies that they did not even bother to shoo them away.

Her itineraries often confuse, and sometimes irritate, foreign leaders who would rather show off their most impressive sights, but her staff says that anyone who does not like poor people should not travel with Hillary Clinton.

The difference is that she wants to pick places where she believes progress is being made, even if it means sidestepping those where it clearly is not.

She visited a Senegalese village where women are fighting male violence by visiting men who have battered women en masse and warning that such behavior is unacceptable. She stopped by a health clinic in Zimbabwe that encourages frank talk about sexual issues, contraception and even the practice of "baby dumping" by unwilling mothers. She went to a school in Uganda where as many girls are graduated as boys.

One of the most impressive places she visited, and one that surely will show up in her stump speeches back in the United States, was the Victoria Mxenge housing project outside Cape Town, South Africa. Nearly 300 women from the Xhosa tribe, with help from the United States and elsewhere, have pooled their talents and meager resources to build each other houses—from making the cinder blocks, to mixing the cement, to painting the walls.

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— Hillary Rodham Clinton

Several stops seemed to be particular favorites of the first lady's, such as visits to "micro-credit" projects, which offer small loans to help villagers invest in their own businesses.

Outside Harare, Zimbabwe, at the Zambuko Trust, Naume Muranda, 42, used a \$150 loan to buy materials to knit clothes for sale. "Things have changed for the better," she said in Shona, through an interpreter. "This has been incentive to work hard and use my hands so I can look after my family."

Similarly, Martha Banga, 40, used a \$100 loan to buy yarn for hats, sweaters, shawls and baby booties that she will sell in Zambia, a three-day bus ride away. Before the loan, she said, "life was difficult. There was a food shortage in the house." Now, she said, she is expanding her two-room house so that she can rent the extra space to tenants.

Another micro-credit program, in a Ugandan village near Kampala, requires groups of 30 or more villagers to secure loans jointly, thereby enforcing a form of self-policing to ensure the money is used for the right purposes and repaid on time.

"There's a really close fit" with Clinton's book, said Joanne Hale, deputy director of the U.S. Agency for International Development in Uganda, "because these are not individual women pursuing individual needs. These are groups of women coming together, saying that maybe if we're together we can do more. . . . It's very 'village-mentality' driven."

Yet what was not mentioned during the program welcoming the first lady to the village is that the lending organization charges interest equivalent to 81 percent per year, three times the local commercial rate. Michael J. McCord, chief executive of the local chapter of the Foundation for International Community Assistance, said he has little choice because of the proportionately high cost of financing such small loans.

"These aren't usurious rates," he said. "The clients don't complain about it. . . . It allows us to cover our costs. That's the way it has to be. The reality is we can't serve our clients if we're not here in a year, and that's why we have to charge these interest rates."

Likewise, Clinton's priorities

came into subtle conflict when she visited two Masai villages in Tanzania.

She and her daughter, Chelsea, were greeted by boisterous local women who put stiff beaded neck ornaments called *Ushangaas* around their necks. The Clintons apparently did not know that the *Ushangaa* is a symbol worn by young girls who have been circumcised and are considered ready for marriage. They also may not have known that the elder at one of the villages boasted to the White House advance team that he has 28 wives, each of whom is left to care for any children she bears.

Clinton said nothing during her trip about female circumcision, a practice widely deplored in the West

as unhealthy and barbaric, until her last stop today when an Eritrean woman mentioned the issue. Rather than condemn it, the first lady used it as an example of troublesome issues that generate cultural conflict and are difficult to reconcile.

In other settings and conversations in the last two weeks, the first lady said it would be unrealistic to expect dramatic improvements for women overnight in nations that have been dominated by men for so many years.

"I've been impressed that the countries I've visited are grappling with this, and some are succeeding more than others," she said. "Change is slow, and it's hard, and it doesn't happen evenly."

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**Hillary ends Africa tour
with dance in Eritrea**

ASMARA, Eritrea — First lady Hillary Rodham Clinton donned a traditional dress and danced with Eritrea's president yesterday to celebrate the country's status as Africa's newest democracy.

Her performance came at the end of a daylong visit to Eritrea, independent from Ethiopia only since 1993, its economy shattered from its long war for independence but its people declaring their will to rebound. It was the last stop for her and her daughter, Chelsea, on their two-week tour of six African nations.

During a day in the desert highlands of Eritrea, Mrs. Clinton honored women who were in the rebel army against Ethiopia and who are now banding together to find work and rebuild their lives.

She and her daughter were showered with popcorn by Eritrean women, a traditional welcome.